





Elegy for the Living

by

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*Elegy for the Living*



## Introduction

In the keynote address at the 2024 AWP conference, award-winning poet Jericho Brown offered a prompt to the writers in the audience. I wrote it down as best and fast as I could.

*Step 1: Remember that everyone has the same assignment.*

*Step 2: Remember that this room is inhabited by some of the most imaginative people on the planet.*

*Step 3: Imagine a world where almost everyone agrees that the most important thing is that no one dies of anything other than old age. Where food and education and international relations are such that people are working toward a situation where death is a matter of time and not a matter of anyone ranking lives. If a Black trans woman dies in America it is only because she got old. If a Palestinian baby dies in Gaza it is only because she is not a baby; she just got old. If someone dies in Congo it's because they got old. And rich.*

*Step 4: Write the poem that refers to what that new world is or how it came to be.*

*Step 5: Be postmodern enough to deal with all the reasons why you might not even allow yourself to see that world in your dreams. That will tell you why you might be afraid to see that world in real life. Because life's question is, can you write a play that you've always wanted to see?*

This is the sort of exercise that inspires radical imagination. Radical imagination is the sort of thing I aspire to hold, at risk of being accused of being an idealist, because I want to see a better world in my dreams, and then I want to allow myself to speak that rendering aloud. I've found no better avenue for the articulation of radical imagination than poetry.

I think of Eileen Myles writing, "I have waited all my life for permission." I resonate with this sentiment; I waited a very long time to admit to myself just how sensitive I am, for fear that I would not also be considered rational, grounded. I waited years before I let myself find poetry. I wasn't ready to be moved in the way poetry insists upon moving its readers and writers. And even after I began studying poetry at the University of the South's School of Letters program, I needed years more to become acquainted with form, with the line break, with the poetic lineages that bridge one imaginary to the next. In my final summer on the mountain, Vievee Francis

prompted our workshop class to trace our poetic lineages on the whiteboard. Our family trees could include those we'd directly studied under, but we were particularly urged to consider the voices of the poets we'd only ever encountered on the page and to reflect critically on how they'd "raised" us. Eileen Myles, Audre Lorde, Ocean Vuong, Adrienne Rich, Nomi Stone, Walt Whitman, and others decorated my family tree. The branches closest to my own name held the names of my mentors, poets and writers at the School of Letters who'd taken me under their wing, expanded my horizons, and introduced me to so many of the writers I know and love today. Tiana Clark, Meera Subramanian, Justin Taylor, Vievee Francis, and Nickole Brown, amongst others, are critical to my poetic lineage. My Sewanee mentors gave me so much: Tiana gave me the line break, language of embodiment, and an example of the kind of teacher I want to be; Meera gave me the knowledge that a classroom can be a community and a challenge to love the land a little bit harder; and Justin gave me music, a profound example of humility, and the sense that storying can be a great adventure. Each of my professors gave me permission every time I stepped in the classroom.

It is only now that I am starting to let myself consider what might become of me, should I let poetry do what it is meant to do, and what might become of the places and communities around me, should I, as Jericho Brown suggested, write the world I'd like to see.

I think poetry, at its most radical, is the best of Camp, a sensibility that that "revels in stylization." In "On Style," Susan Sontag writes that "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role." I like to think of *lampness*, of *womanness*. I like to think of the intricate network of imagination across time, place, and culture, that gives meaning to such things. I find comfort in this post-Structuralist approach to meaning. If meaning was made, it can be re-made.

In this day and age, performativity sometimes gets a bad rap. People feel so attached to *being*, when what I think we are really doing, is *playing* – we are performing, albeit like very serious method actors, what we believe to be real. I'm of the Lacanian mindset that we have access only to the Imaginary, the layer of language and culture that we project upon the Real. Camp isn't what separates the Real from the Imaginary; Camp is simply an acknowledgement of the absurdity of our renderings. In amplifying the constructedness of the Imaginary, we are more easily able to deconstruct "woman," "war," "wealth," "whiteness," etc.



If Camp names the distinction between what is Real and what is imagined, poetry asks the question: What if we performed what we *want* to be real? To figure out what we want to be real, we must first pay attention to our deepest hopes, those we have not yet even allowed ourselves to confess, those hopes we might not yet have named. Poetry, writes Audre Lorde in “Poetry is not a Luxury,” is the “way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.”

I may have many more years spent reading and writing poetry – which is to say, I may have many more years learning about the world – before I can articulate an answer to that question. My thesis is grounded in the precipice of that articulation. Before I can write the world I want to see, and as such, contribute my own language to the construction of it, I must hold hope for the possibility of such a world. This is not an easy task. The world I see is beautiful, sure. Alexander Chee, in his edition of *Best American Essays*, writes that a good essay ought to have *wetness*, the disquieting, messy stuff of blood, sweat, and tears; I think the same is true for any life worth writing about. And I do think mine is worth writing about. But the world is also full of grief, full of reasons for it. It is only when contextualizing hope within a grief-filled world, that hope becomes radical. It becomes the necessary tool of radical imagination.

My thesis considers, but fails to answer, the questions: How do we hold hope in a grief-filled world? And, what is the process by which hope becomes radical?

I think the answer may lie somewhere in the Imaginary, in our renderings of love and faith and despair. Or it may simply lie in the truth of the Imaginary, in the liberation that that truth offers. Radical imagination is as political a practice as is poetry. I have found, in the writing of some of the beloved poets and writers I reference throughout this work, that the poems that move me most are the ones that acknowledge, question, and lament a bereaved world. Octavia Butler does so through dystopia; her short story, “Speech Sounds,” hyperbolizes silence until the truth that silence is violent is painfully unavoidable. Eileen Myles obliterates constructions of gender and sexuality in the line break. Rilke anthropomorphizes God and lauds those who “grip” God “for survival.” In order to grip God for survival, you must first acknowledge the need or desire to survive, and then you must account for all the barriers to survival. If I am to grip poetry for survival, as so many have done before me, I think that it is necessary to admit that I want to survive. And if I want to craft poetry that helps make manifest the world I want to see, then I need first, at least at

this juncture in time and place, name and interrogate the grotesque, the bereft, and the violent.

The tension between grief and hope is the through-line of my work here. The sublime, complicated, wet, decadent, campy parts of my life (“family,” “god,” “gender,” “queerness,” etc.) are the answers I reach toward.



*For those who hold hope.*

*There are no new ideas still waiting in the wings to save us as women, as human. There are only old and forgotten ones, new combinations, extrapolations and recognitions from within ourselves, along with the renewed courage to try them out. And we must constantly encourage ourselves and each other to attempt the heretical actions our dreams imply and some of our old ideas disparage. In the forefront of our move toward change, there is only our poetry to hint at possibility made real. Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accord with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.*

–Audre Lorde

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## Elegy for the Living

I can't imagine passing  
those billboards on I-35,  
the ones that offer up  
evidence of god, without  
my fingers itching to call  
1-800-For a good time  
we dance to sad songs  
like we're surrounded  
by bodies, baroque pop  
on a Brooklyn rooftop.  
For lovers two blocks  
down we are fixtures  
of the skyline, homes  
or complexes. I passed  
under the most indulgent  
sky on my way back  
and it reminded me  
that I am without you.  
I don't want to miss you  
anymore. All those  
times you asked  
what I believe in,  
I answered, I would have  
believed in everything.  
I'd have called up god  
to ask him if he'd  
always been so quiet.  
If he'd grown up in  
a generous place. If  
he'd been held by  
imagined company  
when he was small  
or alone, if he was  
ever small or alone.  
I used to practice  
greetings with my  
mother: *Hello, this is  
Anna.* And my mother



would prompt me: *Now,*  
*how are you, now, tell*  
*them why you're calling.*  
And I'd remember what  
I want, why I'd picked up  
the phone, and my heart  
would race. God, I am  
calling because I want  
you to answer. That  
would be enough.

I.

*I think that the dying pray at the last not “please,” but  
“thank you,” as a guest thanks a host at the door.*

–Annie Dillard

## Litany at Twenty-Five

I was not god-  
willing but I came

with conviction.  
I used to pray

but now I question—  
how to be merciful

in the mirror.  
How one woman called me

*alive* the morning  
I fought to begin.

How I will story  
this year. So far

I have been earnest.  
I am old-enough

for practical life-  
making. And I am young

-enough. Let me begin again.  
Everything is before me,

and sometimes  
I pray. For a drag.

For a quiet mind.  
In the margins of Susan Sontag's

notes on love:  
*We ask it to be anarchic.*

A lover kissed me and I opened  
my lips to tell them I believe

in nothing  
but the joy on our backs.

I've never cared to remember  
a lesson in restraint.

I've spent the last five years  
doing everything to avoid

falling in love. But I can't  
help it, I fall for it all:

Glamour turns me on.  
To be pressed against

the night sky and kissed  
like an answer

to the question Sontag wrote:  
*Can I love someone and still think/fly?*

Last night I prayed for solace –  
haven't we all prayed that prayer?

It's not that I want hunger  
to leave me.

It's that I was born  
in want, and I've grown out of believing

all great artists are sad or  
dead anymore. I am young/

enough to be exalted  
by the joyful poet.

By what is delicious  
to dance to, *jouissance*,

by those small wonders  
which remind me how to be

impressed with the world.  
By this new prayer: thank you, thank you.

## How to House Sit

On the morning  
I turn twenty-six  
I filter through a  
stranger's closet  
for a funeral dress.  
I slink into a little  
black slip, study the  
unimportant contour  
of my hips. I peacock  
in a borrowed bedroom,  
discarding dark silk  
and organza when  
pieces fail to serve  
an appropriate image  
of mourning. There  
is something erotic  
about grief. How it  
demands every inch  
of the body, how it  
consumes. I desire to be  
ravished completely.  
My friends know this  
to be true. I tell them  
over home-cooked meals,  
pasta al dente, salted  
meat, cherry red wine.

I wear a sweater filched  
from New York. Even  
in familiar company  
I prefer to be costumed.  
This time in the image  
of a lover. The borrowed  
house is the nexus  
of my self-mythification,  
such jubilation to be  
found in the disregard  
for my own shampoo,

in opting for nail polish  
discovered under the sink.  
A shimmery blue called  
“You Had Me At Halo.”  
If only for summer  
I would smell like  
gardenia and host  
dinner parties where  
all the dishes match.  
I imagine if I tried to  
strip from my costume  
my skin would peel  
off with it. My friends  
and I gossip and grieve  
in fabulous clothes.  
For us there is  
no conflict between  
appearing and  
being. I appear

in a modest black  
dress that grazes  
my knees and signifies  
condolence. I am  
sorry for the father  
of the deceased,  
who died at twenty-five,  
whose lamentations are  
sung and sung  
again in the mouths  
of butter-voiced  
aunts in impeccable hats.  
I note the location  
of each *amen*: front row,  
after God’s proclamation  
that there will be  
no more Death,  
between the hymn  
and silence. Cousins  
and uncles wax nostalgic.

I imagine my own  
father, heavy head  
hung on the bereaved stem  
of his neck. I conceive  
of myself as subject-  
matter, capable of being  
exhausted. I am to be  
understood and  
stylized in this  
process—

I arch my back  
so my funeral dress  
settles just so over the  
curve of my ass.  
I memorialize the  
curve of my ass in  
my broken iPhone  
camera. I consider  
what muscles constrict  
in the throes of grief.  
I get drunk with a friend—  
the priest who presented  
the eulogy. There is nothing  
erotic about grief except  
there's no need to  
imagine us naked  
when we're already  
laid bare.

## On “Not-Knowing”

*after Donald Barthelme*

Before we broke up, I wrote my girlfriend  
a letter. I wanted to tell her what I know

about us. But I wasn't brave enough to begin  
with us, so I began with the author Barthelme.

He begins with an image of a writer who has invented  
an azalea bush. The writer is at an impasse of not-

knowing; he isn't sure yet, whether the bush will flower  
or freeze in a frost. The azalea bush's fate is out

of the writer's hands. The “not-knowing”  
cements the writer as an artist,

instead of as a sociologist  
or a botanist who can study the plant

dying or the people who let it, who can observe  
the cause and effect of a choice.

When I knew I loved her I very nearly did not  
tell her. I told myself I would have many

great loves. In the end I couldn't stop myself.  
Not-knowing is the first of two criteria for art-making;

The other I'd mentioned to her before.  
I want to hold on to it, now, for just a breath longer.

My dad used to put me to sleep with a game:  
He'd say, “I love you more than all the oil wells in Texas,”

and in return I'd offer my own hyperbolic profession.  
To her, I wrote, I love you more than, I love you more



than this: Barthelme announces the groundlessness  
of language, the meaning of one thing being so entirely reliant

on its interdependency with the next,  
that you don't even really have time to mourn

any belief in the absolute. The azalea bush  
is a made-up matter of meaning.

He considers the monogram by the artist Robert Rauschenberg:  
just a goat stuck inside a tire, the both of them nailed

down to an uninspiring painting. I'm obsessed with it.  
Barthelme likens the work to a piece of prose or

poetry. He deconstructs it as he deconstructs language.  
The work depends on this complex series of interdependencies.

If you wrench the goat from the tire, the entire thing  
collapses. It isn't strange or unsettling or moving anymore.

At the thought of its deconstruction, I panic, so attached  
to the strange combinatorial process that gives it meaning –

I am attached to the strange combinatorial process that gives  
language meaning, that gives relationship meaning.

Rauschenberg must have begun at a place of not-knowing.  
He started at an impasse in which the goat was just a goat

(a real one, taxidermized and found at an antique store)  
and the tire, a tire. But the goat and the tire were unavoidable

choices. He puts the goat inside the tire, and suddenly  
the combination of the two invites

and resists interpretation. Is the goat passing through?  
Is it stuck? Its mystery is essential

to any engagement with the monogram. And the guesswork

is such fun. We can spin and spin around interpretation

of allegory and symbol, and in truth what we're obsessing over may just be an intentionless pile of junk.

(Here is a question: How do we differentiate between masterpiece and junk?)

I don't know what choice Barthelme believed was unavoidable when it came to the azalea bush.

I like to think it survived the frost, but Barthelme is cruel to his darlings, so it probably froze over.

(My answer is this: If a choice feels unavoidable, it is)

I like to think of us as unavoidable objects, to think about how strange and beautiful our combinatorial process has been.

The each of us is already a complex series of interdependencies, of coincidences; we aren't quite as simple as the goat or tire,

at least not on our best days. I wrote to her: There is just something about the combination of us, something about what we invite

and resist together. And it's true: We invite bounds of hope, for and beyond ourselves. We invite rabbit holes and mythologies

and rooftops and poems about god. And we resist a world that fails to acknowledge, and act upon, how much we have to hope for.

We had arrived at an impasse. In front of us, two choices: to carry on or kill our darling. We held each other gently.

We believed that when objects are unavoidable, they find their way. As we broke up, we found each other in strange and fabulous ways.

It was January, but for a few days temperatures spiked and it felt like the beginning of Spring. We drove too late

to the botanical gardens, found a trail in a city park instead.

There was a boulder in a dry creek bed. It was covered in lichen.

We sat on it until light, like the tide, began to crawl  
from the stumps and rocks. We clung, like fog

to the bluff, wistfully unavoidable. We began to long  
for one another, even together as we were.

## Between Want and Devotion

Faith is a funny thing  
we talk around and  
walk within a garden  
between want and  
devotion where wolf's  
bane blooms in moon  
light their congregation  
of waxy cowls prostrate  
themselves and primrose  
soft as stained glass  
glows for queens of  
the night whose crowns  
weigh down their  
fragile necks and

I am alight here

You believe in god  
and vampires in no  
particular order I want  
to answer your prayers  
and let late night have  
her way with us

It isn't the life in our  
throats that tempts  
god and monsters to  
make and immortalize  
us in their image  
It's language all  
the words I rearrange  
only to say  
I believe in you  
and I want everything

for you and I  
will want for you  
as long as I am

because want is the  
only thing that grows  
faster than we do  
and because when  
thunder rolled in  
and rain made us slick  
with wonder and when  
we held each other  
on the dock  
beneath lighted prophecy  
and profession  
and when I watched you  
dance and understood  
the word *sublime*  
I was in want of nothing

## Except for Respite, I'm Not Asking Much

Today I do not want to be a poet  
but a boy  
with a book of war            a field stocked with ant hills  
to crush  
beneath the sole            of a hand-me-down high top

I want to indulge            shamelessly  
how the forgotten  
oven delights in a            zealously  
blackening dessert  
when the lovers'            pleasure  
veers too rich.  
How delicious            to simmer.

I've only ever wanted to be in love with the world,  
but I know it too well.  
The book is not just a book, but the inconceivable toll  
of chapel bells for sons  
who didn't mean to die, for mothers who meant  
to die first.            And the boy  
   is not just a boy.

He is also a gun            also the trigger.

The most despairing myth  
of joy is that we fall into it  
often and heedlessly.  
The myth of the poet is that  
she is not also prone to ruin.

In praise of the fig            she leaves it to rot. O, bruised,  
mottled Muse.  
How hungry she is to encounter exquisite pleasure  
at arm's length.  
How she grieves feverish, yells            with the same tongue  
she sings with.  
How she crumbles at the well-wish in child's script

*Make something     Godish  
for Ezra*

How she weeps for the boy, who is     just a boy.

I'm not asking for much,  
except to break  
from fragility.  
I cannot bear to be good.

Like the ant hill,  
which has already been rebuilt  
with extra measures of fortitude,  
only to be violated     again  
by rain.

Box-Dyed Bird's Nest: June 26, 2020

I threw resistance  
to cliché out the  
window the second  
I learned heartbreak.  
I wallowed. I watched  
the 1999 cult classic,  
*But I'm A Cheerleader*,  
on loop. I drank whiskey  
sours and wrote grand  
proclamations from my  
bathtub: *I will learn/  
the etymology of forgiveness.*  
I stained the sink with  
Splat Pink Fantasy dye,  
with the smell of bleach  
and bubble gum. By June  
I was ready to feel  
new again. I lived  
two blocks from Forest Park,  
the sprawling heart  
of St. Louis. I made it a  
habit of healing to walk  
without direction.  
The park rewarded  
my passivity: Two miles  
of Silver Maples, Sweet-  
gum trees, and eye level  
in the belly of a Juniper, a great  
horned owl. Its yellow gaze  
held a long-occupied seat  
in the canon of mythologized  
creatures. I lingered  
under its spell a while,  
sure to glance away  
every now and again.  
I needed to make sure  
it was real. I felt more  
*real* than I had all summer.  
The next morning, I traced  
my path the best I could,  
checking off landmarks: First  
the bank full of oddly-  
shaped skipping rocks;  
then a rotting stump;



a buckeye, bigger  
than any I'd seen  
at home in Texas. The tree  
was gone. Or more likely,  
my sense of direction  
was failing me. I couldn't  
find the tree, and I couldn't  
find the owl, and I'd  
carried kitchen shears  
with me all this way, and  
I was tired. I sank  
into a bed of lichen.  
The night before I'd hatched  
a plan to chop off  
my electric pink, fried hair  
to leave as an offering  
to the owl, who used downy  
feathers plucked from their  
own breast to make  
home. No matter that  
breeding season had come  
and gone, or that no vole,  
mouse, or starling's coat  
came close to a Splat Pink  
Fantasy hue. I wanted to pray,  
*thank you*, to the creature  
who had offered me some small  
salvation. I wanted to settle  
under something, to soak up  
blood and pain and curl around  
a body again. I stood from  
my lichen nest and reached  
for my shears.

## II.

*At the trial of God, we will ask:  
    why did you allow all this?  
And the answer will be an echo:  
    why did you allow all this?*

–Ilya Kaminsky

*So many are alive who don't seem to care. Casual, easy, they move in the world as though untouched. But you take pleasure in the faces of those who know they thirst. You cherish those who grip you for survival. You are not dead yet, it's not too late to open your depths by plunging into them and drink in the life that reveals itself quietly there.*

–Rainier Maria Rilke

## Good News

A good child is full  
of wonder unless  
he is staring down  
the belly of a tank.  
Then he is a head-  
line. If a child is  
good and lucky  
he is remembered.  
A good harvest is  
reaped by boys  
who are hardly late  
to dinner. If a  
boy is late to dinner  
he is either full  
of wonder or dead.  
A good dinner dirties  
several pots and  
pans and is never as  
good to the person  
who cooked it. A  
good guest thanks  
the cook and does  
not let on that  
they are hungry  
for wonder. Before  
dinner they read  
the headlines.  
A good headline is  
honest about who  
dies and who is  
killed. A good killer  
strikes last. A good  
strike is hungry. If  
a strike is good and  
lucky it makes  
headlines. A good  
story lives when-  
ever we listen.

It daydreams but  
never sleepwalks.  
A good song is  
wet. Shout out  
to "Hot Freaks."  
A good girl bangs  
her head like her  
music is religion.  
If a girl is hungry  
she is good. A girl  
is never good and  
lucky. A good poem  
cries louder than she  
does. If a child can-  
not cry a good poem  
wails doubly. A good  
double is down. A  
good down is 2nd  
and 15 yards from  
the end zone. A good  
end troubles the  
reader. A good reader  
knows the headline  
is really a boy  
shaking in the  
shadow of a tank.

## Autopsy of America

*In 2022, a gunman opened fire on families at a Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, Illinois, killing six and wounding nearly forty. A witness told local reporters that the shooting “sounded like fireworks.”*

I.

Has god forgotten  
he blessed this star strangled sky?  
because we scattered—  
fireworks rained bright, burst full-mouthed  
—mistook our joy for gunfire

II.

Across the country,  
six dead. A man narrates  
Independence Day—  
*at first, it sounded like fireworks—*

III.

Dawn’s early light  
sweetly settles on tongues of  
funeral singers.  
Who will sing an elegy  
for these years? Who will hear it?

## Notes on Speech Sounds

*after Octavia Butler*

I.

In 2008 I was 11  
and my mother  
often brought sick  
dogs or dogs with  
limp legs or trust  
issues home for us  
to love until they  
were well and fed or  
dead, and if they were  
well she'd find a home  
for them elsewhere.  
That Spring four out of  
five puppies died, and  
god, the grief lived  
too big for my small body  
to shelter. So I decided  
to do without  
my body. I went to  
the chapel my father  
had built in the woods  
and sat still on a stone  
slab pew in a feverish  
wish for moss and rock  
to become me. For nature  
to quiet the despair  
that howled in the  
hollow of my throat.

II.

Someday I would like  
to be a mother. For now  
I hold a child's face  
in my phone screen.

III.

At work where I am  
a teacher I am told  
not to say the word  
“genocide” in the  
classroom. So as  
not to offend. I will  
say the word here  
where the worst  
that can happen is  
that I do not offer  
true language.

IV.

A New York Times  
reporter opens her  
story with nine nouns  
in the first sentence:  
Negotiations, release,  
women, children, Gaza,  
exchange, women,  
minors, prisons.  
Women and children  
of one people exchanged  
for women and  
minors of another.  
I wonder whether one  
must be born free  
to be called a child  
in the press.

V.

When I am without  
speech of my own  
I revisit “Speech Sounds,”  
your story of the woman  
whose hopelessness  
drives her into a soundless  
night: She has ventured into  
one last desperate act.

She knows the violence  
that waits outside.  
There is trouble in this  
world grieved by some  
strange illness that has  
cut off *even the living*  
*from one another.*

VI.

You taught me that  
violence speaks when  
language fails, not  
because we deserve  
pain, but because we  
let language fail.

VII.

In your story,  
the woman thinks,  
*these things could happen*  
*anytime*, and she means,  
a prayer-hand closed  
to miracle, a night  
without music, a child  
shaking the shoulders  
of his father to wake up,  
wake up, wake up.

VIII.

Do we both believe  
that the worst thing  
is to be resigned to  
silent stillness  
like the caged bird that  
has long forgotten  
it was born without  
its feathers clipped?

IX.

The hopeless woman



meets a desperate  
man. Like so many he  
has lost his speech.  
He gives her a  
necklace; she gives him  
a name.

X.

I still have the list  
of baby names  
I started before  
I knew about sex  
and well before I knew  
that sex was not how  
I would conceive  
a baby. I will read  
this list of names to  
you, beginning with  
those I wrote when  
I was a child,  
hearing the name in  
a song or story and  
marveling at how sound  
finds home in a body.  
June, Lina, Thomas, Willis,  
after my great-grandfather,  
Calla, Christopher, James,  
and on, and on, and on.

XI.

Here your story  
rakes through me:  
The woman hands  
the desperate man  
a symbol for her  
name. She knows  
he might misinterpret  
the symbol, might  
form the wrong  
shapes against the

roof of his mouth.  
All who knew her  
are lost in speech-  
lessness. Or they  
are just lost. In this  
world you story  
the *only likely language*  
*in common was body*  
*language, so being*  
*armed was often*  
*enough.* The woman  
hands to the man  
the closest thing  
to her name she can.  
But she knows  
her name will never  
be spoken again.

XII.

These days names  
are a contentious  
commodity. Some are  
free. These are the  
names that stir  
in the mouths of  
those who mourn  
the death of language,  
its sounds and  
its speakers. This  
death can happen  
anytime. This death  
happens all the time.

XIII.

This Winter on three  
occasions I heard  
the names of children  
killed in Gaza read  
aloud. Each time the  
list had grown longer.

The last time a poet  
read the names of  
each child killed  
in order of age.  
By the second hour  
she was stopped  
by security. She had  
only made it to the  
names of children  
under the age of five.

XIV.

Today a  
flower is the last  
of its kind. Tomorrow  
a final word is spoken.  
Something stops me  
when I try to imagine  
a world where no one dies  
of anything but old age.  
Where people are not made  
extinct, and neither  
is speech.

XV.

The hopeless woman  
and the desperate man  
admit to one another  
what was not safe,  
how they yearned  
to understand, and  
between them at least  
there was no violence.

XVI.

The hopeless woman  
lives. The desperate  
man dies. This isn't  
quite right. The hopeless  
woman lives. The

desperate man is killed.  
No words are spoken.

XVII.

Later the woman goes  
back to the body of the  
man. To see him.

XVIII.

The woman finds  
two children orphaned  
by the death of language.  
She considers abandon.  
But it is too late, she  
has already looked.

XVIX.

Seeing is a grief  
we owe to those  
whose names are  
free.

## If You're Reading This Out Loud

*after the 30th Annual NYC Dyke March*

Touch my skin where the word  
bites. I want a tattoo shop in  
the airport terminal so I can  
remember where we were  
saved. There was an elder  
carrying a sign that said  
*dyke rage will save you.*  
I tasted the chorus and its teeth  
teased the skin on my throat  
before sinking into me. I want  
to hallow uproar. I want  
a movie about queer joy  
with a smart soundtrack and  
I want that old dyke to voice  
god. If there is a redemption arc  
I want it to be real. Where  
the myth is rescue and  
the martyr's mind is always in  
the gutter. Lately people  
have been telling me I look sad.  
The night before we sang and swelled  
in the city streets we tipped back  
overpriced drinks at a bar costumed  
with rainbow flags and I ran into  
a boy whose name  
my little sister still can't hear  
without flinching.  
I want to write  
a poem about salvation that  
punctures the tongues  
of anyone who doesn't mean it.  
To slice open  
the sound of indignation  
and water the bedrock, live  
in collusion with what grows.

Sometimes also I want  
to send to my queer friends  
a convincing proposal to abandon.  
To find a plot of land in the woods,  
bring a trunk full of books and  
sex toys and caffeinated tea.

Make peace.  
Make believed.  
Make loved.

## No One Is As Cool As Eileen Myles But I'd Like To Be

No one is as cool as Eileen  
Myles but I'd like to be  
a decade      women return  
to when they're tired of this  
one like the bangs they don't  
remember cutting themselves.  
An eat-shit grin that teases its  
smoke              with teeth.  
My dog splays in the shade  
won't budge when I call her  
name like I chose  
the wrong one or she's pissed  
I called her a dog when  
everyone knows she's a mutt.  
I taught a boy who said he  
respected me  
because *most gay people*  
*shove it in your face*. He said  
he didn't have a problem with  
fags & dykes but *what did*  
*they have to be so loud about*.  
Actually he said *gay people*  
but another boy in high school  
didn't              when he looked at  
my friend's hoop earring  
& said *which ear*  
*is the gay ear* so he could  
make up his mind about us.  
I don't know how to raise my  
voice without losing it.  
I'm cool when my hair is  
chopped so you could mistake  
me for punk-rock. I'm cool  
when I spread my legs  
like a man & say *dyke* as though  
you're in on the secret.  
Do you want to know something?  
Sometimes I miss

having something to hide.



### III.

*Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role.*

–Susan Sontag

## God plays M.A.S.H.

*how to play Mansion Apartment Shack House, the fortune-telling game*

1. Choose four categories (i.e., *who you'll love, how many children you'll have, etc.*). Each category will offer a window into the future. When completing this step, consider what matters. On loose-leaf paper, or in chalk on pavement, record your categories.
2. Write down three possible outcomes per category. So as not to tempt fate, include both desirable and undesirable options.
3. Close your eyes while a stranger draws a spiral on the page. Better yet, strip completely, and allow the stranger to draw a spiral on the small of your back. When you say *stop*, the stranger will tell you how many rings they've drawn. Trust them.
4. Making your way down the page; strike out the option which correlates to the number you've been dealt. Repeat until one option per category remains.
5. Read your fortune.

~~mansion apartment shack house~~

*who you'll love*

**Genesis**                    where streams and snails laze, light-laden                    the day  
verbosely gorgeous    in the first dream                    cast by lace-soft light you  
discover desire

**Devotion**                    to the happenstance of creation                    in the jubilant howl of  
wind                    that, like song,                    gives no indication that presently it  
will quiet

**Revelation**                    in a wish and a dying breath carried by the same note  
here is the mouth                    that holds a prayer like the barrel of a  
gun                    which yesterday it called to fire

*where you'll live*

**Advent**                      in the blood-stained thighs that welcome                      a new  
witness to belief                      its sight still shrouded                      faith is  
born                      joyed and fevered

**Song of Songs**                      as night sings shrill stridulations                      thumb                      on  
comb-teeth                      hissing frenzy song                      lovers cry                      blissful  
the belly of a toad cries                      *wretch, wretch, wretch*

**Rapture**                      because you know better                      than to build home in a body  
but when the seer welcomes you inside                      you rest in devotion

*how many children you'll have*

**None**                    so dazzling as the poet                    tangled in the arms of  
morning                    her lover's eyes                    the green of seas                    that sweep  
beneath star-crossed skies

**Daughters**                    a mystic degrades her own flesh                    not in imitation of the  
bloodsoaked martyr                    hips trembling                    in conversation with  
survival

**Repentance**                    for a dying wish                    a soundless body                    iron red thighs  
you have called upon carnage                    for absolution                    in the name of  
divine reimagining

*what you'll lose*

**Portrait of God**    your children know your face                    but they do not see  
your desperation                    for miracle                    that you are also in want of  
deliverance

**Confession**                    how delicious                    to be led into temptation, delivered by the  
fever of indulgence                    how you yearn to act in their image                    and  
sink to your knees

**Faith**                    the body erodes                    the mountain weeps                    and                    still  
you hold the skies together                    like the morning that clings to  
the lovers                    like the lovers who cling to each other

## Tanka of the Stranger and the Myth

*after Albert Camus*

To misquote Camus –  
something of an enterprise –  
*Should I kill myself*  
*or have a cup of coffee?*  
I choose this deep, rich body

## **Tanka on the Semiotics of Laughter**

*after Ferdinand de Saussure*

*Humor is no joke –*

How can you be so sure? Ha.

That the sound of joy

outlives the words that name it:

Awe, delight, *joie de vivre*



## Tanka of Gender Trouble

*after Judith Butler*

Been meaning to ask  
how you became a woman.  
I began as *want*,  
I wore hunger like a mood,  
flushed skin, chiffon, rich charmeuse

## Pandora Feels Hot, Wreaks Havoc

*after Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Pandora, 1871*

Pandora drinks boxed wine  
and texts the ex whose orgasm  
she best recalls,

spins and pricks the globe  
to send a swarm  
of locusts to the shore.

She hopes some creep is stung,  
and not a wild woman on the run.  
No text has come—

she wonders if she's misplaced the moans  
of one lover for another.

But no, Pandora is not one to forget

a thing of her own creation.  
Scribbling men write, the world  
went fucking haywire

when she came into herself.  
All manner of misery, a consequence  
of divine curiosity.

The mountain pierced the sky,  
the sea seduced the land,  
and the forests were swallowed

by heavenly fire.  
Pandora, for one, doesn't know why  
ruin gets such a bad rap—

Crests were always meant to fall,  
and from ashes rise wildwoods  
Which dance across her horizon,

As do harlots and harbingers of change  
for whom she holds Hope.  
Pandora takes a drag and exhales

a blood-orange sky,  
remembers herself in iron-rich oil,

emblazoned by the painter's hand.

She marvels as the memory of his vision  
slips from her like a dream--*her* dream,  
a myth of her own creation, *fallen*.

The phone chimes--  
Pandora chugs her pinot.  
Her ex can be over in ten.

*No worries, Pandora grins. Just checking in.*

## Barbie and Barbie Walk into a Bar

*after Nicky Beer*

Costumed boisterously in hot pink PVC, one of Barbie's hands reaching for Barbie's waist, the space between them taut with possibility. I want Barbie to tell Barbie she's madly in love, but Barbie has moderate to severe anxiety and a smooth, defined boyfriend back at the Dream House. And besides, Barbie has bigger things on her plate. The men who leer at Barbie and Barbie, the one who looks like a cop who says, *Be a doll and smile*, and now Barbie has a Class A misdemeanor and a mugshot, which is actually iconic and which Barbie prints and sticks to the refrigerator with a magnet and of which she sends a photo to Barbie and Barbie in their group text called, coincidentally, The Dolls. Barbie says Barbie looks like a slut and everyone hearts the message. Barbie's boyfriend asks what's so funny and I make Barbie pick up and leave him and their shiny house that isn't at all fulfilling Barbie's mid-century modern dreams anyway and I don't even feel bad about it because I'm the one who has to play girl for real. Barbie drives to Barbie's and says she'd have brought a boom box if it was 1989 but instead she has a bottle

of whiskey and a lot to get off  
her chest. So Barbie listens.  
And they ignore the sound  
when their plastic crop tops  
squelch over their nipple-less  
breasts. Out of breath, Barbie  
laughs, *What will Barbie say?*  
So Barbie texts Barbie who  
texts Barbie who says, *Well,*  
*It was a long time coming.*

IV.

*This / was one way to be inside the world rather than outside/ looking into a bright window.*

–Nomi Stone

## My Sister and I Make-Believe We're Cageless

We asked of our spines impossible  
curves, pinched at our soft bellies,  
thighs. Tied up our t-shirts into  
triangle bikinis. In the open field  
behind the little blue farmhouse  
we played woman. Costumed  
callow figures in good nature,  
cooed, *yes, thank you, yes,*  
*please* to the skirt of loblolly pines  
that caged the field. We puffed  
out our chests and pruned each  
other, *yes, I do, I do,* to the grapevines,  
where yesterday we'd swung cross  
the dry creek bed, my sister  
and I not then so concerned  
with growing into some-  
thing seen, some-thing wanted.

We always heard the rain before  
we saw it. Storms saunter in  
from town with the air of a bone  
to pick. When they come in  
daylight, my father says,  
*that's the devil beating his wife.*  
Soused on cheek and sun  
shower, we'd bird-dog each other  
through the field, against the trees.  
We brandished blades of yucca,  
one of us the devil, the other  
trying her best not to get caught.  
My sister stayed quiet when I got her;  
she played a different woman than I.  
At the little blue farmhouse our mother  
looked upon our bright-stung backs  
and bellies. We looked upon her.  
She combed through our tangles  
with farmer's hands

and said nothing.



## **Punctum in the Figure of My Mother**

*The punctum is... that which pricks me  
(but also bruises me, is poignant to me).  
– Roland Barthes*

In this story the daughter  
is told to mind her footfall,  
so she dances like *caress*,  
moth on moonflower, hands  
lauding sky like Spring.

My mother's skin scriptures  
in scars, signifies  
where grief lives inside  
the day's first light. I bear  
her body as I bathe her.

## Lilted Creature Ghazal

*after Evie Shockley*

*hotter than two foxes fucking in a forest fire.* I slip into my mother's twang, creature comforts,  
skin-tight closet, vowels clinging in all the right places. those fried summer days. creature comforts.

sugar maple, red buckeye, butterfly weed: the closer we drive to kentucky, the farther the sky  
stretches in my mother's mouth. I savor lilted sounds, briny, milk-braised creature comforts.

*I'll be damned but do not ever take the Lord's name in vain, and don't say fuck, either.*  
I don't know how to bite my tongue. my mother did not raise creature comforts.

melted ice, silence, finally: *and when your grandma asks if you have a boyfriend.*  
clipped talk sinks below Loretta's "You Ain't Woman Enough." fiddle-phrased creature comforts.

light on limestone kisses shade. her city kid sticky with peach juice, sweating in the fever  
of a queer dusk. I want my mother to lilt *Anna* as she prays for creature comforts.

## Dear Daughter-Poet

How delicious the carnage,  
like *release, slice, dis-quietude*,  
like the sound the seed makes  
bursting against teeth, this  
decision to waste and want. Is it  
the metaphor or your mother  
you grieve? She is living  
in the same house with the  
clutter and the curtains drawn.  
Asked again why you never call  
or write any poems about her.  
You are almost ready  
to confess to the dying bird  
on the welcome mat, flight  
feathers clipped and quick to bite.  
Not all mothers and daughters  
are so incongruous.  
Like summer fog, like ready-tea  
whistle, like breath.  
Not all metaphors survive.

## Epilogue

## God's Prayer to Love

I am always thinking  
about sex as the world  
is ending. The world  
seems always to be  
delicious and ending.  
I was just as hopeful  
before you but now  
I desire steadily that  
we will watch what  
hope has done from  
rocking chairs on a big  
porch that wraps snugly  
around a little green  
house, whose creaks  
are our creaks, whose  
body, our body. I don't  
pray, but today I transpose  
my name for Christ's  
and supplicate, I have no  
body but yours. Because  
you have me, not as I do,  
but as kind silence holds  
confession. As day  
contains each constellation,  
you keep safe the myth  
of myself. You flip  
through Rilke's love poems  
to God and stop when he  
writes, *we cherish those  
who grip you for survival.*  
You don't like your reading  
voice. Sometimes I ask  
you to read aloud. This time  
I recite Rilke's wants  
to you: Darkness,  
shimmering light, for  
those who move through  
untouched to open

their mouths. Flick  
out your tongues and taste  
how luscious this world is,  
how sweet the fruit  
on the verge of rot.  
Should you lay me down  
I know you will do so  
gently. Your hands  
are a generous place. Not  
everyone gets so lucky as  
to know what it is  
to be held like hope.

## Acknowledgements

My father raised me to revere and love sweet, storied Sewanee. He brought me to the mountain, and my sister, who got there first, shared with me her joy and wonder.

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Thank you to my friends, who have long shared with me a love for language and storytelling.

## Notes

### Epigraph

1. The opening epigraph comes from Audre Lorde's essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury."

### Section I.

1. This section's epigraph comes from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.
2. Susan Sontag's notes on love, excerpted in "Litany at Twenty-Five," are included in the second volume of her published diaries, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Journals and Notebooks, 1964-1980*.
3. Many of the images referenced in "On 'Not-Knowing'" allude to Donald Barthelme's essay of the same title.

### Section II.

1. The first epigraph in this section comes from Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic*.
2. The second epigraph comes from *The Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*.
3. "Good News" references the Guided By Voices song "Hot Freaks," which was introduced to me in my final Sewanee summer by Justin Taylor.
4. "Notes on Speech Sounds" includes some of Butler's own words, taken from her short story "Speech Sounds." Butler's words are italicized.

### Section III.

1. This section's epigraph comes from Susan Sontag's essay, "On Style."
2. "Should I kill myself or have a cup of coffee" is the question commonly misattributed to the philosopher Albert Camus. Despite popular belief, the hypothetical appears nowhere in *The Stranger*.
3. My "Tanka on the Semiotics of Laughter" plays with the pronunciation of the post-structuralist philosopher and linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (pronounced, *so-sure*).
4. Ocean Vuong includes the word "ha" in a playful moment in his poem, "Not Even This."
5. "Barbie and Barbie Walk into a Bar" imitates the form and style of Nicky Beer's "Drag Day at Dollywood."

### Section IV.

1. This section's epigraph comes from one of my favorite poems, "Wonder Days" by Nomi Stone.
2. "The devil's beating his wife," a Southern idiom, refers to a sunshower. The idiom appears in the poem, "My Sister and I Make-Believe We're Cageless."
3. "Lilted Creature Ghazal" is formatted to fit the page.



4. The phrasing “generous place,” which appears in prologue and epilogue poems, comes from Rilke’s *Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*.

